

The Neighbourhoods Project: Vibrant Abbotsford Talks about Poverty

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other local organizations.

Challenge

Abbotsford, BC, is described as “the city in the country.” Split into 17 neighbourhoods in widely diverse settings – rural, suburban and urban – Abbotsford defies easy description. Organizers at Vibrant Abbotsford wanted to learn more about residents’ needs and understanding of poverty. In particular, they wanted to know whether significant differences existed in how people perceived poverty based on where they lived.

Between March and October 2009, Vibrant Abbotsford used funds from BC’s Ministry of Housing and Social Development to gather input from residents in one rural and one urban neighbourhood. The “Neighbourhoods Project” also afforded the opportunity to learn more about two other groups of people affected by poverty – immigrant and migrant farm workers, and women in Abbotsford’s Punjabi community.

Strategy

Three coordinators were hired on short-term contracts to gather and review data for the Neighbourhoods Project. Federal and provincial job creations funds paid the coordinator salaries and enabled three people to build their job skills.

The coordinators held community conversations, focus groups and one-on-one conversations. They sent targeted e-mails in order to answer four questions:

- What do you know about poverty in your local community?
- Is poverty affecting you or anyone you know?
- If poverty is affecting you, what kind of help do you think you need?
- As a community, how well do you think we are doing in helping those who live in poverty?

Responses were collected from 107 Abbotsford residents; half were urban dwellers, half lived in rural areas. One large conversation event – an all-candidates conversation café on poverty – was held in advance of provincial elections in May 2009 [see Caledon story: *Creating Election Excitement: Vibrant Abbotsford Hosts Pre-Election All Candidates Poverty Forum*, January 2010]. Held in partnership with two Abbotsford community organizations, the event provided an opportunity for 65 urban and rural residents to speak with candidates about their parties’ approach to poverty reduction.

Outcomes

Responses to the four poverty questions from both urban and rural residents indicated that, other than a tendency for urban dwellers to be more guarded about sharing personal circumstances, there were few differences in urban and rural dwellers’ views on poverty. Finding recreation and sports opportunities for children, learning more about financial literacy and gaining access to affordable housing were three concerns the two groups held in common.

In response, Vibrant Abbotsford will shortly produce a low-income resource guide that lists shelters, meal providers, information on subsidized housing and recreational activities. With regard to affordable housing, members of Vibrant Abbotsford have joined in several housing-related initiatives. School District 34’s parenting program, Abbotsford Early Childhood and Vibrant Abbotsford began offering financial literacy classes in December 2009. A branch of the Abbotsford public library is considering offering such classes on an ongoing basis, and Abbotsford Community Services is building a financial literacy component into its parenting programs. These and other financial literacy initiatives have become an important focus for Vibrant Abbotsford.

Once the urban and rural research was under way, the three coordinators began talking with farm workers and members of Abbotsford’s Punjabi community. To date, Vibrant Abbotsford had not established close ties with either of these groups and the Neighbourhoods Project was seen as a good way to initiate conversation.

Every year, hundreds of migrant and immigrant farm labourers are employed in Abbotsford fields. Using translators and farm owners to facilitate discussions, the coordinators discovered that – despite what most Canadians would consider unacceptable housing, medical care and transportation conditions – immigrant and migrant farm labourers did not see themselves as poor. Compared with living conditions in their home countries, many felt that their lives in BC were better than what they had left. What mattered most was the opportunity to work and send money home to relatives worse off than themselves. Long hours in the field left little time, energy or inclination for self-advocacy.

Vibrant Abbotsford plans to advocate on behalf of farm labourers for better housing and job conditions, and to ensure children's access to education. It will communicate the lessons from its Neighbourhoods Project to Abbotsford Community Service's immigrant issues committee.

Gaining a better understanding of immigrant views of poverty is particularly important in Abbotsford, where visible minorities make up 23 percent of the population. Indo-Canadians comprise the City's largest group of new Canadians and the largest sub-group is from the Province of Punjab. In an effort to better understand poverty from the perspective of this community, conversations were held with 27 women aged 19 to 78 at a local Sikh temple. (The community's traditions did not allow males to speak with female coordinators.)

An interpreter helped identify several differences in understanding of the language of poverty. For example, the word 'poverty' means 'homeless' in Punjabi. 'Wealth' describes people who enjoy good relationships with their spouses and families. Poverty is broadly understood as a lack of fulfilling relationships rather than a lack of financial assets. However, discussions of wealth uncovered the fact that many in the group were concerned about their household finances. They were eager to sign up for classes that could teach them more about budgeting and credit card management.

When considering the question of whether their community was effective in helping those living in poverty, the group stated that traditional caste divisions make it impossible for their community to work together – to alleviate poverty – or to do anything at all. Vibrant Abbotsford plans to offer financial literacy classes in Punjabi to this group, with the hope of building greater levels of trust and understanding.

Though the differences in attitudes towards poverty were discovered to have less to do with location and more to do with individual circumstances, the Neighbourhoods Project fulfilled its greater mission: It helped Vibrant Abbotsford improve its own perspective on poverty, identify areas for more conversation and partnership development and channel its energies accordingly.

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References

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